

that the most productive estate was one which had tenants who were born there and were bound as if to ancestral property by ties of long familiarity, as far back even as the cradle. . . .

On far-off estates, to which visits by the owner are not easy, it is in the long run preferable to keep the land under free tenant farmers rather than under slave overseers. This is true of all types of land, but particularly of grain-producing land, which a tenant farmer can injure only minimally (as he might injure vineyards or orchards). Slaves, however, damage grain land very seriously. They rent out the oxen; they do not feed them or the other animals well; they don't plow the land with the necessary energy; they record the sowing of far more seed than they have actually sown<sup>182</sup>; as for the seed which they have sown, they don't look after it in the way necessary for it to grow correctly; and when they bring the harvest to the threshing floor, day after day while they are threshing, they lessen the total amount by outright dishonesty or by carelessness. They themselves even steal it, and they certainly don't guard against theft by others. And they don't even record the amount of stored grain honestly in their account books. The result is that both overseer and slaves commit crimes, and the land quite often gets a bad reputation.<sup>183</sup> Therefore, as I have said before, if the owner cannot be present, I think that a farm of this type should be leased out.

### Sharecroppers

The life of both tenant farmers and sharecroppers was very harsh. Despite endless toil, they lived at subsistence level; if illness or injury occurred, or if the crops were damaged by bad weather, the family faced starvation. Often the landowner was unaware of or unconcerned about their plight.

In the letters translated in selections 47 and 185, Pliny discussed the management of farms and the problems that arise when tenants cannot pay their rent. In the letter below, he writes that problems with tenants who did not pay their rent led him to try a sharecropping system.

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Pliny the Younger, *Letters* 9.37

It is certainly not in your nature to demand from your close friends public expressions of support if it is inconvenient for them; and I have been your faithful friend too long to fear that you might interpret things other than I would wish if I don't come to town on the Kalends<sup>184</sup> to see your inauguration as consul. The reason for my absence is this: I am detained by the necessity of leasing my estates and settling these lease arrangements for several years to come. I must adopt a new system. During the past five-year period,<sup>185</sup> despite considerable decreases in rents, the arrears increased.<sup>186</sup> As a result, many of my tenants are no longer concerned about reducing their debts to me since they feel they have no hope of being able to pay them off. They even seize and eat the produce of the land,<sup>187</sup> like

<sup>182</sup>It would be interesting to know what the slaves do with the seed they don't sow. Do they sell it and pocket the money? Do they eat it because they are hungry? Do they secretly plant it somewhere else and raise their own crop?

<sup>183</sup>*bad reputation*: that is, as being unproductive.

<sup>184</sup>*Kalends*: the name given to the first day of each month; compare Ides, note 8 of Chapter II.

<sup>185</sup>Five years was a regular period for leases in the ancient Roman world; see selection 85.

<sup>186</sup>Pliny does not explain why his tenant farmers have not been able to pay their rent. Was there a drought? Did bad weather destroy the crops? At least Pliny reduced the rent to ease his tenants' situation. A less charitable landowner might have seized the tenants' equipment. See selection 185.

<sup>187</sup>They are eating the produce rather than selling it to raise rent money or saving the seed to plant for next year's crops. Pliny does not explain whether they were hungry and needed to eat the produce.

people who think they no longer have to be frugal since the property is not theirs anyway. I must face these mounting problems head-on and remedy them. One plan for remedying them would be to lease the land not for cash but for a share of the produce, and to place some of my own men as overseers to supervise the work and guard the produce. Certainly there is no return on an investment fairer than that offered by the land, the weather, and the seasons. This experiment demands great honesty, keen watchfulness, and many working hands. Nevertheless, I must try it and, just as with a chronic disease, experiment with every possible remedy. So, you can understand that it is not a whimsical reason which prevents me from being present on the day of your consular inauguration. But I will celebrate it with as much joy, rejoicing, and prayers for good fortune as if I were present.

### A Farmer's Life

The passages translated here deal primarily with attitudes toward agriculture and with problems of land ownership, rather than with descriptions of farming operations. K. D. White has collected many descriptions of such operations in his book, *Country Life in Classical Times*.<sup>188</sup>

The life of the peasant farmer (and of his wife and children) was filled with endless, back-breaking toil: clearing, plowing, planting, hoeing, pruning, weeding, irrigating, and harvesting grain, grapes, olives, vegetables, fruit, and fodder; feeding, cleaning, breeding, raising, shearing, milking, slaughtering goats, cattle, sheep, pigs, poultry, and draft animals; building barns, fences, and sheepfolds; cutting firewood; making and repairing tools and equipment; squeezing grapes, pressing oil, grinding grain; making baskets, jars and boxes for storage. The list of chores is endless.<sup>189</sup>

Exhausting toil and grinding poverty were the lot of the farmer. The title of this anonymous poem, *Moretum*, is the name given to a food item common among the poor. It consisted of a medley of vegetables and herbs, ground together and mixed with vinegar, oil (if available), and sometimes cheese (if available). The poor, who often could not afford oil and cheese, mixed whatever plants, domestic or wild, were available to them.<sup>190</sup> Although some scholars translate *moretum* as "salad," it was probably much more similar to modern pesto sauce, which is also a combination of ground herbs, oil, and cheese.

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*Moretum* (anonymous) 1-24, 27, 29-37, 52-54, 117-122

And now night had completed twice five winter hours, and the winged sentry announced the new day with his crowing.<sup>191</sup> Simulus, the peasant farmer of a meager little plot, worried about gnawing hunger on this coming day. He slowly raised his weary limbs from his ugly little cot. With anxious hand he groped through the stagnant darkness and felt his way to the fireplace, burning his hand when he touched it. One tiny spark remained from a burned log, but the ashes concealed the glow of live flames underneath. Stooping over, he moved his lamp forward, close to these embers, and drew out with a needle the dry wick. With frequent huffs and puffs, he stirred up the sluggish fire.

<sup>188</sup> See note 152 of this chapter. Another of his books well worth looking at is *Roman Farming* (Ithaca, 1970).

<sup>189</sup> Compare the list of chores which Cato assigned to his farmworkers on rainy days and holidays (selection 207) and the operations described by Columella in selection 97.

<sup>190</sup> Wild plants may have kept alive the families of subsistence farmers during years of crop failure.

<sup>191</sup> Mock heroic style: after ten hours of cold winter darkness, the day dawned and the cock crowed. For another parody of heroic or epic style, see note 217 of this chapter.

Finally, when the fire had caught and the lamp was lit, he turned away, using his hand to shield the wick light from a draft.

He unlocked the cupboard door with a key. Spread out on the cupboard floor was a paltry pile of grain. From this he took for himself as much as his measuring bucket held. He moved over to the mill and put his trusty lamp on a small shelf built onto the wall for the purpose. Then he slipped off his outer garment and, clad only in a shaggy goatskin, he swept the stones and inner portion of the mill. He put both his hands to work. [*The left poured the grain into the mill, the right turned the millstone.*] The grain which was ground by the rapid blows of the millstone poured out as flour. . . . At times he sang country songs and eased his labor with a rural tune. Or he shouted for Scybale. She was his only companion, an African woman. . . . He called her and told her to put firewood on the fireplace and to heat up some cold water.

After he had ground the grain, he mixed the flour with salt and water, formed the mixture into a round loaf, cut the impression of a cross on the top,<sup>192</sup> and set the loaf to cook in the fireplace.

While it baked, Simulus was not idle. He worked at another task, lest bread alone would not satisfy his hunger, and he prepared another dish to eat with the bread.

Since he had no meat, he made a *moretum* of cheese, garlic, parsley, rue, coriander, salt, olive oil, and vinegar. All these ingredients were ground in a mortar with a pestle and carefully blended together. A large portion of the poem is devoted to a description of the preparation of the *moretum*.

Meanwhile, hard-working Scybale plucked the bread out of the fireplace. Simulus happily took a piece in his hand.<sup>193</sup> Now that he had put aside the fear of hunger and was free of anxiety, at least for this day, he tied leggings on his legs, covered his head with a leather cap, yoked his obedient oxen, drove them into the field, and sank his plow into the earth.

## Shepherds

Ancient writers developed a romantic image of the shepherd's life as a carefree lazy existence amid grassy meadows. The Latin word for shepherd is *pastor*<sup>194</sup>; a *pastoral* is defined by Webster's as "a literary work dealing with the life of shepherds, generally in an artificial manner, typically drawing a conventional contrast between the innocence and serenity of the simple life and the misery and corruption of city life." In reality a shepherd's life was at best dull, at worst almost intolerably harsh.<sup>195</sup> Shepherds spent months in isolation, leading their flocks from pasture to pasture. Rain or shine, sleet or hail, they were outside with their sheep, often in rugged mountain

<sup>192</sup> Loaves of bread of this design (round, with a cross marking off the four sections) were found in the excavations at Pompeii. Pictorial representations of these loaves also appear in wall-paintings at Pompeii.

<sup>193</sup> Bread or porridge with *moretum*, olives, or fish brine would be a common lower-class meal. Few people could afford meat.

<sup>194</sup> And the Latin word *pastor* means literally "he who feeds the sheep, takes them to pasture." Some modern churches call their ministers *pastors*. (*Minister* is a Latin word which means "servant.")

<sup>195</sup> This was true also of the ancient cowherd's life. One might compare the romantic American image of the cowboy with the reality of the cowboy's life: long, monotonous, and lonely hours following the herds of cattle, day and night, summer and winter.